

Sermon: Pent Proper 17 “A”

August 28, 2011

Text: Matthew 16:21-28

Theme: Beyond Comfort to the Cross

I hope you don't mind, but I'm going to make myself comfortable for the sermon time today. I brought in a nice cushy chair to sit in; you all have cushioned chairs so I figure I can have one too. Why don't you get comfortable too? Sit back a little, take a deep breath and relax. (Some of you probably think I'm still not back from vacation with this kind of attitude, right?)

Everyone deserves to be comfortable. We all want to be comfortable. In fact, much of our modern economy is driven by companies trying to produce products and services that make our lives more comfortable. Remote controls, cell phones that do almost everything for us, the *Clapper* that will turn on and off our lights without getting up, online shopping so we don't have to leave home, shoes with wheels on them so we don't even have to walk. The list is endless and it is amazing what people can come up with to make life comfortable and convenient...and we like it that way.

When given the option, most of us will choose the easiest path to get from one place to the other, the path that is the quickest and least stressful or painful. Sometimes that path is not available, but we usually seek it first. We humans, I think are even created to avoid pain and to seek comfort. Our nerve endings tell us when we get too close to pain. Pain is the indicator that we need to stop doing something and find another way. My dad always used to tell that old joke, “A man went to his doctor and said, ‘Doctor, my arm hurts when I move it like this.’ The doctor answered, ‘Then don't move it like that.’” Short, simple...don't do the things that cause pain. Seek comfort and what feels right instead.

There is a phrase that most of us pastors learn when we are taught how to preach and bring God's Word to people. It is a phrase that many of you have heard before. It says that sometimes God's Word comes to comfort the afflicted and sometimes it comes to afflict the comfortable. Now think about that for a minute.

Comfort the afflicted—that when we are afflicted with suffering or grief or trouble or doubt, God's Word comforts us with hope and promise and love.

Afflict the comfortable—that when we get too comfortable and think we have it all figured out or are pretty set in our ways and settled in...God's Word comes to challenge us and convict us and move us off center.

The Holy Spirit knows what we need and then brings it.

In our reading from Matthew today, Jesus and Peter got into quite an exchange. Jesus explained what was coming down the road: suffering, death, resurrection.

Clearly, for Peter this was completely unacceptable. Now I don't know if Peter had grown comfortable, but maybe so. Jesus had come into his life and had made him one of his 12 closest followers. Peter was in the good company of this powerful man who was healing people and performing miracles and teaching with amazing authority. And Peter had a front row seat for all of it.

Right before today's verses, Jesus gave him a big old pat on the back because Peter answered a question correctly when Jesus asked him who he thinks Jesus is. Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus then calls him a rock and promises to build the church on this rock.

Life was good. Peter must have been thrilled to be lifted up this way. And then Jesus had to go and ruin everything by laying out a path of pain and suffering. So much for the good times! Peter had gotten comfortable...so much so that Jesus needed to set him straight about what really meant to be the Messiah. It wasn't going to be a comfortable ride to save the world from sin and death. It was going to take a cross. And to follow Jesus, it would mean embracing the cross and being willing to sacrifice one's comfort in order to do the work of God. It would mean choosing the path that is not always the easiest, most convenient or comfortable.

This is God's way: to be willing to walk through any circumstances, to do what is hard and painful, when necessary, to demonstrate love and hope and saving power to you and me and our whole world. It is the way of the cross.

In 1988 I was a rebel. I crossed a picket line; it was a picket line made up of nuns. They were standing in front of a theater in Philadelphia that was showing the movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. This movie had really upset many in the Christian community because they thought it was suggesting that the story of Jesus had unfolded differently than what the Bible says. They thought it would be damaging to people who might see it.

I saw the movie and it was not quite what people thought. The movie imagined "what if" Jesus had been offered an opportunity to come down from the cross. Perhaps he would have enjoyed many of the things that we enjoy: getting married, having children. And I have to admit that for a while during the movie I wondered if it was suggesting that that had happened. But then at the end of the movie it was as if a dream sequence had ended. Jesus was on the cross and did not come down. He knew that he had to suffer and die to win the salvation of the world. It is the way of the cross.

There is a story about a church wanted to improve attendance at their major worship services, so they hired a powerful advertising agency to come in, study their situation, and make recommendations. The ad agency did their research... and then suggested to the church that they should get rid of all the crosses in the church... because the crosses might send a negative message to prospective young worshippers!

James W. Moore, *Choosing the Way to the Cross*, writes this about that idea: "Now, I'm sure that in its history, that advertising agency has come up with some brilliant ideas... but, in my opinion, that was not one of them! We can't get rid of the cross! We don't want to get rid of the cross. The cross is the dramatic symbol of our faith, hope, love, and forgiveness. The cross is the powerful reminder of God's sacrificial and redemptive love for us. And the cross is the constant signal to us of how God wants us to live and love today... as sacrificial servants. We are not called to be prima donnas... We are called to be servants. We are called to take up the mission of Christ... and to emulate the servant spirit of our Lord."

Allow me one baseball image today. You know I'm a big Brewers fan and my daughter is an even bigger Brewers fan. They seem like a charmed team. They are winning most of their games, especially since the All Star break and the games have been great to watch. They seem to find ways to pull out games that I would write off (that comes from growing up watching the Cubs ☺). In all my years of watching baseball I've never seen so many sacrifice bunts and sacrifice flies that are bringing in runs for the team. The sacrifice has become a huge part of the Brewers recipe for success. Players are doing what it takes, not worrying about their own statistics, but playing for the good of the team...and it's paying off.

Jesus' sacrifice, the cross, is God's recipe for the salvation of the world and to be his followers, like Peter, we follow that same recipe and embrace the cross. We live faithfully as we think and act beyond ourselves for the sake of the world... so that ALL can know and receive the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ. We serve and give sacrificially so that those in need can find hope and healing and relief from the pain and discomfort of their lives.

I appreciate our World Vision Team members who have been preparing the past couple of months to do the Chicago Half Marathon to benefit people in need around the world. When these folks signed up they had to make a financial commitment themselves AND they had to begin a regimen of training that has demanded much of them. They signed on, willing to sacrifice other things in their lives in order to make an impact in the lives of others. Thanks be to God!

I appreciate our young people and their chaperones who took a week out of their lives to serve others in West Virginia. I know they had a lot of fun, but also know it wasn't always comfortable: it was beastly hot; sleeping arrangements were very crowded. There was a LONG ride to get there. But they did it and brought great blessing to a community.

I appreciate all who have served and who will serve in our INNS program to provide shelter for the homeless in our community, all those who come to the Soup Kitchen faithfully, all those who spent hard-earned money in a difficult economy to buy school supplies for kids who probably wouldn't have them otherwise.

I could go on and on listing ways we follow Jesus by giving of ourselves sacrificially and often uncomfortably. This is God's way, so too may it always be our way as well. Amen.